

## Port and Marine

# Shipmasters honor Capt. Frank Becker

By CHARLES W. THEISEN  
News Marine Writer

Capt. Frank Becker, a colorful riverfront personality in Detroit for more than a half century, was given a surprise honor by his colleagues



—News Photo

**CAPT. FRANK BECKER**  
Awarded honorary life  
membership

yesterday — honorary life membership in the International Shipmasters' Association (ISMA).

The life membership is the first ever granted by the group, according to Capt. N. James O'Hara, president of ISMA Lodge No. 7.

Capt. Becker was present for the regular lodge luncheon meeting at Dossin Great Lakes Museum on Belle Isle when he was voted the honorary membership on a surprise motion from the floor.

Becker, 79, sold his towing business and retired several years ago after being severely injured in an auto accident.

But he has retained an avid interest in maritime affairs.

A salt water veteran of both world wars, Capt. Becker operated in the early 1930's what was then the world's only floating post office, organized spectacular tugboat races in the Detroit River in the early 1950's and entertained the city's political and business notables aboard his luxuriously appointed yacht, the Florence K. Becker.









**Capt. Becker's pride and joy**

— During his colorful career, Capt. Frank Becker operated a tugboat company on the Detroit River and saw sea duty during both world wars, but the craft he was proudest of was his yacht, the Florence K. Becker (shown above), which he acquired in 1959. Among the yacht's fittings was a woodburning fireplace, which Becker is shown fueling at left. While Becker used the Florence K. to entertain friends and politicians, he also took many Detroit children who had never been on a boat for cruises on the yacht.

# Capt. Frank Becker, tugboat man and a legend on the river, is dead

By **CHARLES W. THEISEN**  
News Staff Writer

For more than a half century, Capt. Frank Becker worked at establishing himself as a legend on the Detroit riverfront — and succeeded.

The colorful tugboat man died Monday in a Nashville, Tenn., hospital at the age of 81. His body was returned to Detroit yesterday but funeral arrangements are incomplete.

Services will be under the direction of the William R. Hamilton Co., 3975 Cass, Detroit. A service will be conducted in Old Mariners' Church before the body is taken to Conneaut, Ohio, for burial.

Mr. Becker and his wife, Florence, had gone to Nashville to spend the winter and visit relatives.

Mrs. Becker, who was with her husband when he died, said Capt. Becker had appeared to be making a good recovery from a "mild stroke" he suffered a month ago, and that the couple had planned to return to Detroit soon.

Capt. Becker was a survivor of a colorful era on the Detroit River, when sailors were expected to weave about themselves an aura of adventure.

In Capt. Becker's case, the aura surrounded reality during a career which included operation of a tugboat company on



Florence Becker



Capt. Becker

the river and salt water service in two world wars.

He liked to tell how he was born in a log cabin near the Mississippi River in Wisconsin and later became interested in sailing as a boy selling newspapers to sailors on the waterfront in Conneaut, Ohio.

He started sailing as a messboy at the age of 13; survived the famous death-dealing Great Lakes storm of November, 1913; served on the lighthouse tender Marigold and on a warship during World War I.

He became owner of a tugboat on the Detroit River in 1926, and, as the owner and operator of the Becker Towing Co., became one of the Detroit area's more widely known riverfront personalities.

In 1932, Capt. Becker christened — with Detroit River water — what became known as the world's only floating post office. He operated the mail boat, serving vessels passing Detroit, for many years.

In 1934, he bought the ferry Pontiac and reconditioned it for use as a floating tavern — "beer garden" was the description applied at the time — but the vessel burned before it could be put into service.

With World War II threatening, Capt. Becker, a member of the naval reserve, returned to active Navy duty.

By then, he already was known in print as "Detroit's No. 1 Sea Dog," and was president of the Detroit Lodge of Shipmasters.

During the war years, he kept in touch with Detroit by mail, with a series of letters from the North Atlantic, where he was on convoy duty, and later the South Pacific. The letters were published in The Detroit News by columnist George W. Stark.

Capt. Becker returned to Detroit in 1946 to assume the presidency of the Old News-



# BECKER ...from Page Three

boys and personal operation of his tugboat company.

In the 1950's, he organized a series of tugboat races on the Detroit River which attracted thousands of spectators, and brought him into conflict with a Coast Guard admiral who had different ideas about how tuboats should race. Capt. Becker's views prevailed.

In a reference to his wartime service, Capt. Becker observed at the time: "Admirals are practically a dime a dozen but there's only one chief boatswain to a ship."

He also began a postwar series of annual wild game banquets at which he delivered the main address, invariably a strongly worded denunciation of the deteriorated condition of the Rouge River.

In 1956, Capt. Becker supervised the burning of the D&C passenger steamers

Greater Detroit and Eastern States. He towed the boats to a position in Lake St. Clair off Lakeshore Drive — so spectators could witness the burnings — lit the match which set them afire, and with tears streaming down his face watched as they burned to the waterline.

By 1959, Capt. Becker had what became his most valued material possession, the Florence K., a yacht, named for his wife.

The Florence K.'s furnishings included a woodburning fireplace and, as befitted the yacht of a tugboat operator, two towing bitts on its afterdeck. Capt. Becker said the bitts — steel posts to handle towlines — were included because "I never can tell when some friend may need a hand."

Capt. Becker entertained friends and politicians aboard the Florence K., along with hundreds of Detroit children who

might never otherwise have known what it meant to be afloat.

One of the more publicized incidents involving Capt. Becker occurred on July 30, 1962, when the British ship Montrose rammed a cement barge towed by a Becker tugboat. The Montrose sank under the Ambassador Bridge. No lives were lost. The hulk of the Montrose was an object of sightseeing for two months until it was raised and towed away.

Embroided in the lawsuits which resulted from the sinking, Capt. Becker quipped that he was the first American to sink a British ship since the war of 1812.

Capt. Becker became seriously ill in 1969 and his wife assumed management of the towing company. He recovered and went back to work but was seriously injured in an auto accident in 1973 and retired.

The Becker boats were sold, the Florence K. going in 1975.

But Capt. Becker couldn't leave the river for long. He and his wife occupied an apartment in a high-rise riverfront apartment building with a balcony from which he could keep watch on the traffic below. He frequently called newsmen to report an unusual sight on the river, a new ship passing, or an unusual development of any kind.

The man known to unleash language which could shrivel the hide of a shirking seaman was a trustee of Old Mariners' Church and he once spent most of a day arranging the rescue of a dog stranded on an ice floe in the river.

Capt. Becker was 5-foot-7 inches tall. "He wasn't a tall man," his wife said yesterday in talking about his death, "but he was a big man."

# Capt. Becker, Mayor of River, Is Dead

BY CURT HASELTINE  
Press Staff Writer

Capt. Frank Becker, for decades a colorful figure on the Detroit waterfront, died Monday in a convalescent home in Nashville, Tenn.

Services for the 81-year-old owner of the Becker Towing Co. will be at 10 a.m. Friday at Mariners' Church, with burial in Nashville.

Capt. Becker was the acknowledged mayor of the Detroit River. He owned and operated the Becker Towing Co., which hauled cement clinkers for the Peerless Cement Co. from Port Huron to the Detroit plant on the Rouge River. He also fueled the Ford Motor Co.'s freighters.

These enterprises made him a considerable fortune, but his outspoken criticisms of officials and companies who allowed riverfront properties to deteriorate brought him his principal reputation.

CAPT. BECKER went sailing at the age of 13 as a messboy aboard the Coast Guard cutter Marigold. It was a lot more profitable than peddling newspapers in Conneaut, Ohio.

He was serving on the Marigold when the killing storm of 1913 hit the Lakes. He believed that he was the last survivor of that savage storm.

Capt. Becker got into the tugboat business almost by accident. He owned a tug-like boat in 1929 when a contractor on the Ambassador Bridge, then under construction, suggested that he start hauling steel for that project.

Loud, because of partial deafness, and profane, be-



Free Press Photo

CAPT. Frank Becker, who first went sailing at the age of 13.

cause of his associations, Capt. Becker was as well liked as he was well known along the river.

He was president of such prestigious organizations as the Propellor Club and the Old Newsboys. His open-handed generosity benefited the Dossin Great Lakes Museum, the Marine Historical Society of Detroit and hundreds of individuals.

Inner city children who never had the privilege of

riding on the Detroit River were honored guests aboard his \$200,000 yacht, the Florence K. Becker. The yacht was named for his seafaring wife, otherwise known as Tugboat Annie.

Politicians were frequent guests, as well, along with old shipmates and other friends.

Capt. Becker was the first honorary life member of the International Ship Masters Association, having been president of Detroit Lodge No. 7.

WHILE PRESIDENT of the Propellor Club of Detroit, he inaugurated, with the Marine Historical Society of Detroit, the International Tugboat Race along the Detroit River from Amherstburg, Ontario, to Detroit.

The first race, in 1950, drew a moderate number of spectators but in following years thousands lined the shores on the Detroit and Windsor sides to watch.

Rivalry was intense between the U.S. and Canadian tugs and although the Coast Guard

protested it failed to stop the enthusiastic competition.

Capt. Becker was a pillar of Mariners' Church and was instrumental in having it moved to its present location.

An annual event that was anticipated by the marine community and area politicians was Capt. Becker's wild-game dinner at the old Fort Shelby Hotel. He collected game months in advance with hunts on Drummond Island and elsewhere and gifts from hunting friends who brought in their prey from the West.

BUT THE EVENT that earned Becker most notoriety was the sinking of the Canadian freighter Montrose beneath the Ambassador Bridge in 1962. The vessel, departing from Detroit Harbor Terminal, collided with the Becker barge and tug transporting cement clinkers from Port Huron. The Montrose tipped over on her side beneath the bridge without loss of life. She lay there for a couple of months.

A Coast Guard inquiry blamed insufficient lighting on the tug and barge and Becker was sued for \$3.5 million.

But that didn't stop the ir-responsible captain from bragging that his was the first American vessel to sink a British boat on the Great Lakes since the War of 1812.

Finally Capt. Becker, who among other chores had operated Detroit's unique floating post office for years, sold off his boats and retired to a riverfront apartment where his binoculars kept a close check on happenings on his beloved river.

Capt. Becker is survived by his wife; a daughter, Mrs. Bernice H. Joseph; one brother, two sisters, seven grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

The body will be at the Wm. R. Hamilton Co., 3975 Cass, until 6 p.m. Thursday.

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